Tomás decides to walk.

From his modest flat on Rua São Miguel in the ill-famed Alfama district to his uncle's stately estate in leafy Lapa, it is a good walk across much of Lisbon. It will likely take him an hour. But the morning has broken bright and mild, and the walk will soothe him. And yesterday Sabio, one of his uncle's servants, came to fetch his suitcase and the wooden trunk that holds the documents he needs for his mission to the High Mountains of Portugal, so he has only himself to convey.

He feels the breast pocket of his jacket. Father Ulisses' diary is there, wrapped in a soft cloth. Foolish of him to bring it along like this, so casually. It would be a catastrophe if it were lost. If he had any sense he would have left it in the trunk. But he needs extra moral support this morning, as he does every time he visits his uncle.

Even in his excitement he remembers to forgo his regular cane and take the one his uncle gave him. The handle of this

cane is made of elephant ivory and the shaft of African mahogany, but it is unusual mainly because of the round pocket mirror that juts out of its side just beneath the handle. This mirror is slightly convex, so the image it reflects is quite wide. Even so, it is entirely useless, a failed idea, because a walking cane in use is by its nature in constant motion, and the image the mirror reflects is therefore too shaky and fleeting to be helpful in any way. But this fancy cane is a custom-made gift from his uncle, and every time he pays a call Tomás brings it.

He heads off down Rua São Miguel onto Largo São Miguel and then Rua de São João da Praça before turning onto Arco de Jesus—the easy perambulation of a pedestrian walking through a city he has known his whole life, a city of beauty and bustle, of commerce and culture, of challenges and rewards. On Arco de Jesus he is ambushed by a memory of Dora, smiling and reaching out to touch him. For that, the cane is useful, because memories of her always throw him off balance.

"I got me a rich one," she said to him once, as they lay in bed in his flat.

"I'm afraid not," he replied. "It's my uncle who's rich. I'm the poor son of his poor brother. Papa has been as unsuccessful in business as my uncle Martim has been successful, in exact inverse proportion."

He had never said that to anyone, commented so flatly and truthfully about his father's checkered career, the business plans that collapsed one after the other, leaving him further beholden to the brother who rescued him each time. But to Dora he could reveal such things.

"Oh, you say that, but rich people always have troves of money hidden away."

He laughed. "Do they? I've never thought of my uncle as a man who was secretive about his wealth. And if that's so, if I'm rich, why won't you marry me?"

People stare at him as he walks. Some make a comment, a few in jest but most with helpful intent. "Be careful, you might trip!" calls a concerned woman. He is used to this public attention; beyond a smiling nod to those who mean well, he ignores it.

One step at a time he makes his way to Lapa, his stride free and easy, each foot lifted high, then dropped with aplomb. It is a graceful gait.

He steps on an orange peel but does not slip.

He does not notice a sleeping dog, but his heel lands just short of its tail.

He misses a step as he is going down some curving stairs, but he is holding on to the railing and he regains his footing easily.

And other such minor mishaps.

Dora's smile dropped at the mention of marriage. She was like that; she went from the lighthearted to the deeply serious in an instant.

"No, your family would banish you. Family is everything. You cannot turn your back on yours."

"You are my family," he replied, looking straight at her.

She shook her head. "No, I am not."

His eyes, for the most part relieved of the burden of direct-

ing him, relax in his skull like two passengers sitting on deck chairs at the rear of a ship. Rather than surveying the ground all the time, they glance about dreamily. They notice the shapes of clouds and of trees. They dart after birds. They watch a horse snuffle as it pulls a cart. They come to rest on previously unnoticed architectural details in buildings. They observe the bustle of traffic on Rua Cais de Santarém. All in all, it should be a delightful morning stroll on this pleasant late-December day of the year 1904.

Dora, beautiful Dora. She worked as a servant in his uncle's household. Tomàs noticed her right away the first time he visited his uncle after she was hired. He could hardly take his eyes off her or get her out of his mind. He made efforts to be especially courteous to her and to engage her in brief conversations over one minor matter after another. It allowed him to keep looking at her fine nose, her bright dark eyes, her small white teeth, the way she moved. Suddenly he became a frequent visitor. He could remember precisely the moment Dora realized that he was addressing her not as a servant but as a woman. Her eyes flitted up to his, their gazes locked for a moment, and then she turned away—but not before a quick complicit smile curled up a corner of her mouth.

Something great was released within him then, and the barrier of class, of status, of utter improbability and unacceptability vanished. Next visit, when he gave her his coat, their hands touched and both lingered on that touch. Matters proceeded swiftly from there. He had, until then, had experience of sexual intimacy only with a few prostitutes, occasions that had been terribly exciting and then terribly depressing. He had fled each

time, ashamed of himself and vowing never to do it again. With Dora, it was terribly exciting and then terribly exciting. She played with the thick hairs of his chest as she rested her head on him. He had no desire to flee anywhere.

"Marry me, marry me, marry me," he pleaded. "We will be each other's wealth."

"No, we will only be poor and isolated. You don't know what that's like. I do, and I don't want you to go through it."

Into that amorous standstill was born their little Gaspar. If it were not for his strenuous pleading, she would have been dismissed from his uncle's household when it was discovered that she was with child. His father had been his sole supporter, telling him to live his love for Dora, in precise opposition to his uncle's silent opprobrium. Dora was relegated to invisible duties deep within the kitchen. Gaspar lived equally invisibly in the Lobo household, invisibly loved by his father, who invisibly loved his mother.

Tomás visited as often as he decently could. Dora and Gaspar came to see him in the Alfama on her days off. They would go to a park, sit on a bench, watch Gaspar play. On those days they were like any normal couple. He was in love and happy.

As he passes a tram stop, a tram rumbles up on its rails, a transportation newness hardly three years old, shiny yellow and electric. Commuters rush forward to get on it, commuters hurry to get off it. He avoids them all—except one, into whom he crashes. After a quick interaction in which mutual apologies are proffered and accepted, he moves on.

The sidewalk has several raised cobblestones but he glides over them easily.

His foot strikes the leg of a café chair. It is bumped, nothing more.

Death took Dora and Gaspar one unyielding step at a time, the doctor summoned by his uncle expending his skills to no avail. First a sore throat and fatigue, followed by fever, chills, aches, painful swallowing, difficulty breathing, convulsions, a wild-eyed, strangled losing of the mind—until they gave out, their bodies as grey, twisted, and still as the sheets they'd thrashed in. He was there with each of them. Gaspar was five years old, Dora was twenty-four.

He did not witness his father's death a few days later. He was in the music room of the Lobo house, sitting silently with one of his cousins, numb with grief, when his uncle entered, grim-faced. "Tomás," he said, "I have terrible news. Silvestro . . . your father, has died. I have lost my only brother." The words were only sounds but Tomás felt crushed physically, as if a great rock had fallen on him, and he keened like a wounded animal. His warm bear of a father! The man who had raised him, who had countenanced his dreams!

In the course of one week—Gaspar died on Monday, Dora on Thursday, his father on Sunday—his heart became undone like a bursting cocoon. Emerging from it came no butterfly but a grey moth that settled on the wall of his soul and stirred no farther.

There were two funerals, a paltry one for a servant girl from the provinces and her bastard son, and a rich one for a rich man's poor brother, whose lack of material success was discreetly not mentioned.

He does not see an approaching carriage as he steps off a

curb, but the driver's cry alerts him and he scampers out of the way of the horse.

He brushes against a man standing with his back to him. He raises his hand and says, "My apologies." The man shrugs amiably and watches him go.

One step at a time, every few steps turning his head to glance over his shoulder at what lies onward, Tomás makes his way to Lapa walking backwards.

"Why? Why are you doing this? Why don't you walk like a normal person? Enough of this nonsense!" his uncle has cried on more than one occasion. In response Tomás has come up with good arguments in defence of his way of walking. Does it not make more sense to face the elements—the wind, the rain, the sun, the onslaught of insects, the glumness of strangers, the uncertainty of the future—with the shield that is the back of one's head, the back of one's jacket, the seat of one's pants? These are our protection, our armour. They are made to withstand the vagaries of fate. Meanwhile, when one is walking backwards, one's more delicate parts—the face, the chest, the attractive details of one's clothing—are sheltered from the cruel world ahead and displayed only when and to whom one wants with a simple voluntary turn that shatters one's anonymity. Not to mention arguments of a more athletic nature. What more natural way to walk downhill, he contends, than backwards? The forefeet touch down with nimble delicacy, and the calf muscles can calibrate their tensing and releasing with precision. Movement downwards is therefore elastic and without strain. And should one trip, what safer way to do so than backwards, the cushioned buttocks blunting one's fall?

Better that than to break one's wrists in a forward tumble. And he's not excessively stubborn about it. He does make exceptions, when climbing the many long, winding stairs of the Alfama, for example, or when he has to run.

All of these justifications his uncle has waved aside impatiently. Martim Augusto Mendes Lobo is an impatient successful man. Yet he knows why Tomás walks backwards, despite his testy interrogations and his nephew's dissembling explanations. One day Tomás overheard him talking to a visiting friend. It was the very dropping of his uncle's voice that made him prick up his ears.

". . . the most ridiculous scene," his uncle was saying, sotto voce. "Imagine this: Ahead of him—that is, behind him—there is a streetlight. I call over my secretary, Benito, and we watch in silent fascination, our minds preoccupied with the same question: Will my nephew walk into the streetlight? At that moment, another pedestrian appears on the street, at the other end. This man sees Tomás walking towards him backwards. We can tell from his cocked head that my nephew's curious way of advancing has caught his attention. I know from experience that there will be an encounter of sorts—a comment made, a jest thrown out, at the very least a bewildered stare as he passes by. Sure enough, a few steps before Tomás reaches the streetlight, the other man quickens his pace and stops him with a tap on the shoulder. Tomás turns. Benito and I cannot hear what the two say to each other, but we can watch the pantomime. The stranger points to the streetlight. Tomás smiles, nods, and brings a hand to his chest to express his grat-

itude. The stranger smiles back. They shake hands. With a wave to each other they depart, each going his way, the stranger down the street, and Tomás—swivelling round, moving backwards once more—up the street. He circles the streetlight without the least trouble.

"Ah, but wait! It's not over. After a few steps the other pedestrian turns his head to glance back at Tomás, and clearly he is surprised to see that he is still walking backwards. Concern can be read on his face—*Careful, you'll have an accident if you don't watch out!*—but also a measure of embarrassment because Tomás is looking his way and has seen him turn to stare, and we all know it's rude to stare. The man quickly turns his head to face forward again, but it's too late: He collides with the next streetlight. He hits it like a clapper hits a bell. Both Benito and I wince instinctively in sympathy. Tottering, he grimaces as he brings his hands to his face and chest. Tomás runs to help him—he runs *forward*. You'd think it would look normal, his forward gait, but it doesn't. There is no bounce to his step. He advances with great, long strides, his torso moving smoothly in a straight line, as if on a conveyor belt.

"Another exchange takes place between the two men, Tomás expressing great concern, the other man waving it aside while keeping a hand pressed to his face. Tomás retrieves the man's hat, which has fallen to the ground. With another handshake and a more muted wave, the poor man staggers off. Tomás—and Benito and I—watch him go. Only once the man has turned the corner of the street does Tomás, in his usual rearward manner, resume his course. But the incident has flustered

him, evidently, because he now smartly bangs into the streetlight he so artfully avoided a minute earlier. Rubbing the back of his head, he turns to glare at it.

"But still, Fausto, he persists. No matter how often he bangs his head, no matter how many times he falls over, he goes on walking backwards." Tomás heard his uncle laugh and the friend Fausto join in. Then his uncle continued more somberly. "It started the day his little boy, Gaspar, died of diphtheria. The boy was born out of wedlock to a servant here. She died of the sickness too. Then, as fate would have it, my brother, Silvestro, dropped dead a few days later, midday, mid-speech. Already Tomás's mother had died when he was young. Now his father. To be so assailed by tragedy! Some people never laugh again. Others take to drink. My nephew, in his case, chose to walk backwards. It's been a year. How long will this bizarre grieving last?"

What his uncle does not understand is that in walking backwards, his back to the world, his back to God, he is not grieving. He is *objecting*. Because when everything cherished by you in life has been taken away, what else is there to do but object?

He takes a roundabout route. He turns off Rua Nova de São Francisco and starts walking up Rua do Sacramento. He is nearly there. As he swivels his head to see over his shoulder—he remembers there's a streetlight ahead—he looks up at the rear of his uncle's grand residence, with its elaborate cornices and intricate mouldings and soaring windows. He feels eyes upon him and notices a figure at a window on the corner of the second floor. Given that is where his uncle's office is located, it is

likely his uncle Martim, so he turns his head back and strives to walk confidently, carefully skirting the streetlight. He follows the wall surrounding his uncle's property until he comes up to the gate. He spins round to reach for the bell, but his hand pauses in midair. He pulls it back. Though he knows his uncle has seen him and is waiting for him, he tarries. Then he takes the old leather diary from the breast pocket of his jacket, slips it out of its cotton cloth, puts his back against the wall, and slides down to a sitting position on the sidewalk. He gazes at the book's cover.

Being the Life in Words
and the Instructions for the Gift
of Father Ulisses Manuel Rosario Pinto
humble Servant of God

He is well acquainted with Father Ulisses' diary. Whole sections he knows by heart. He opens it at random and reads.

> As slave ships approach the island to deliver their cargo, they have much accounting & housecleaning to do. Within sight of the port, they throw body after body overboard, both port & starboard, some of them limp & pliant, others feebly gesticulating. These are the dead & the seriously sick, the first discarded because they are no longer of any value, the second for fear that whatever illness is afflicting them might spread & affect the value of the others. It happens that the wind carries to my ears the cries of the living slaves as they protest their expulsion from the ship,

as it also carries the splash their bodies make upon hitting the water. They disappear into the crowded Limbo that is the bottom of the Bay of Ana Chaves.

His uncle's house is also a Limbo of unfinished, interrupted lives. He closes his eyes. Loneliness comes up to him like a sniffing dog. It circles him insistently. He waves it away, but it refuses to leave him alone.

He came upon Father Ulisses' diary mere weeks after his life was irretrievably blighted. The discovery was a happenstance related to his work at the National Museum of Ancient Art, where he works as assistant curator. The Cardinal-Patriarch of Lisbon, José Sebastião de Almeida Neto, had just made a donation to the museum of ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical objects accumulated over the centuries from across the Portuguese empire. With Cardinal Neto's permission, Tomás was sent by the museum to do research in the Episcopal archives on Rua Serpa Pinto to establish the exact provenance of these beautiful artifacts, the story whereby an altar, chalice, crucifix or psalter, a painting or a book, had come into the hands of the Lisbon diocese.

What he found were not exemplary archives. Succeeding secretaries of the various archbishops of Lisbon clearly did not dwell overmuch on the earthly matter of organizing thousands of papers and documents. It was on one of the open shelves devoted to the patriarchate of Cardinal José Francisco de Mendoça Valdereis, Patriarch of Lisbon between 1788 and 1808, in a stuff-all section given the breezy title *Miudezas*—Odds and Ends—that he spotted the hand-stitched volume with the

brown leather cover, the handwritten title legible despite the splotchy discolourations.

What life was this, what gift? he had wondered. What were the instructions? Who was this Father Ulisses? When he pried open the volume, the spine made the sound of small bones breaking. Handwriting burst out with startling freshness, the black ink standing in high contrast to the ivory paper. The italic, quill-penned script was from another age. The pages were faintly rimmed with sunny yellow, indicating that they had seen very little light since the day they were written upon. He doubted that Cardinal Valdereis had ever read the volume; in fact, given that there was no archival note attached to the cover or anywhere inside—no catalogue number, no date, no comment—and no reference to the book in the index, he had the distinct impression that *no one* had ever read it.

He studied the first page, noticing an entry with a date and a place name above it: *September 17, 1631, Luanda*. He turned the pages with care. Other dates appeared. The last year recorded, though without a day or month, was 1635. A diary, then. Here, there, he noted geographic references: "the mountains of Bailundu . . . the mountains of Pungo Ndongo . . . the old Benguela route," locales that all appeared to be in Portuguese Angola. On June 2, 1633, there was a new place name: São Tomé, the small island colony in the Gulf of Guinea, "that fleck of dandruff off the head of Africa, long days north along the damp coast of this pestilential continent." His eyes came upon a sentence written a few weeks later: *Isso é minha casa*. "This is home." But it wasn't written just once. The words covered the page. A whole page of the same short sentence,

closely written, the repeated lines wavering up and down slightly: "This is home. This is home. This is home." Then they stopped, replaced by prose that was more normally discursive, only to appear again some pages later, covering half a page: "This is home. This is home. This is home." Then once more, further on, for a page and a quarter: "This is home. This is home. This is home."

What did it mean? Why the manic repetition? He eventually found a possible answer on a page where the reiteration was the same as in every other instance, covering nearly two pages this time, with one difference, a spillage at the end, a clue that the phrase on the page was an ellipsis that the author completed in his mind every time: "This is home. This is home. This is home where the Lord has put me until He takes me to His Breast." Father Ulisses evidently had been racked by acute homesickness.

On one page Tomás found a curious sketch, a drawing of a face. The features were hastily outlined except for the mournful eyes, which were meticulously drawn. He studied those eyes for many minutes. He plunged into their sadness. Memories of his recently lost son swirled in his mind. When he left the archives that day, he hid the diary among innocuous papers in his briefcase. He was honest to himself about his purpose. This was no informal loan—it was plain theft. The Episcopal archives of Lisbon, having neglected Father Ulisses' diary for over two hundred and fifty years, would not miss it now, and he wanted the leisure to examine it properly.

He began reading and transcribing the diary as soon as he found the time. He proceeded slowly. The penmanship went

from the easily readable to skeins of calligraphy that required him to work out that this scribble represented that syllable, while that squiggle represented this syllable. What was striking was how the writing was poised in the early sections, then grew markedly worse. The final pages were barely decipherable. A number of words he could not make out, no matter how hard he tried.

What Father Ulisses wrote when he was in Angola was no more than a dutiful account and of modest interest. He was merely another minion of the Bishop of Luanda, who "sat in the shade on the pier upon his marble throne" while he worked himself to a listless stupor, running around baptizing batches of slaves. But on São Tomé a desperate force took hold of him. He began to work on an object, the gift of the title. Its making consumed his mind and took all his energy. He mentioned seeking the "most perfect wood" and "adequate tools" and recalled training in his uncle's shop when he was young. He describes oiling his gift several times to help in its preservation, "my glistening hands artisans of devoted love." Towards the end of the diary, Tomás found these odd words, extolling the imposing character of his creation:

> It shines, it shrieks, it barks, it roars. Truly the Son of God giving a loud cry & breathing his last as the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom. It is finished.

What did Father Ulisses train in, and what did his uncle's shop produce? What did he oil with his hands? What was shining and shrieking, barking and roaring? Tomás could not find

a clear answer in Father Ulisses' diary, only hints. When did the Son of God give a loud cry and breathe his last? On the Cross. Could the object in question be a crucifix, then, Tomás wondered. It was certainly a sculpture of some sort. But there was more to it than that. It was, by Father Ulisses' account, a most peculiar work. The moth in Tomás's soul stirred. He remembered Dora's last hours. Once she was bedridden, she held on to a crucifix with both hands, and no matter how much she tossed and turned, no matter how much she cried out, she didn't let go of it. It was a cheap brass effigy that glinted dully, smallish in size, the type that might hang on a wall. She died clasping it to her chest in her small, bare room, with only Tomás present, in a chair by her bed. When the final moment came, signaled to him by the dramatic stoppage of her loud, rasping breathing (whereas their son had departed so quietly, like the petals of a flower falling off), he felt like a sheet of ice being rushed along a river.

In the hours that followed, as the long night ended and the new day stretched on, as he waited for the undertaker, who kept failing to show up, he fled and returned to Dora's room repeatedly, pushed away by horror, drawn back by compulsion. "How will I survive without you?" he pleaded to her at one point. His attention fell on the crucifix. Until then he had floated along religiously, observant on the outside, indifferent on the inside. Now he realized that this matter of faith was either radically to be taken seriously or radically not to be taken seriously. He stared at the crucifix, balancing between utter belief and utter disbelief. Before he had cast his lot one way or

the other, he thought to keep the crucifix as a memento. But Dora, or rather Dora's body, would not let go. Her hands and arms clutched the object with unyielding might, even as he practically lifted her body off the bed trying to wrench it from her. (Gaspar, by comparison, had been so soft in death, like a large stuffed doll.) In a sobbing rage, he gave up. At that moment, a resolution—more a threat—came to his mind. He glared at the crucifix and hissed, "You! You! I will deal with you, just you wait!"

The undertaker arrived at last and took Dora and her cursed crucifix away.

If the object that Father Ulisses had created was what Tomás inferred it was from the priest's wild scribblings, then it was a striking and unusual artifact, something quite extraordinary. It would do nothing less than turn Christianity upside down. It would make good his threat. *But did it survive?* That was the question that gripped Tomás from the moment he finished reading the diary in his flat after he had smuggled it out of the Episcopal archives. After all, the object might have been burned or hacked to pieces. But in a pre-industrial age, when goods were crafted one by one and distributed slowly, they shone with a value that has faded with the rise of modern industry. Even clothing was not thrown away. Christ's scanty clothing was shared by Roman soldiers who believed he was nothing more than a lowly Jewish rabble-rouser. If ordinary clothes were passed on, then surely a large sculpted object would be preserved, all the more so if it was religious in nature.

How to determine its fate? There were two options: Either

the object had stayed on São Tomé, or it had left São Tomé. Since the island was poor and given over to commerce, he guessed that it had made its way off the island. He hoped it had gone to Portugal, to the mother country, but it could also have gone to one of the many trading posts and cities along the coast of Africa. In both cases, it would have travelled by ship.

After the death of his loved ones, Tomás spent months seeking evidence of Father Ulisses' creation. In the National Archives of Torre do Tombo, he searched and studied the logbooks of Portuguese ships that travelled the western coast of Africa in the few years after Father Ulisses' death. He worked on the assumption that the carving had left São Tomé on a Portuguese ship. If it had departed on a foreign ship, then God only knew where it had ended up.

Finally, he came upon the logbook of one Captain Rodolfo Pereira Pacheco, whose galleon had departed São Tomé on December 14, 1637, carrying, among other goods, "a rendition of Our Lord on the Cross, strange & marvellous." His pulse had quickened. This was the first and only reference to a religious object of any kind that he had seen in relation to the debased colony.

Written next to each item in the logbook was its point of disembarkation. A great number of goods were unloaded at one stop or another along the Slave and Gold coasts, sold or replaced by other goods for which they were traded. He read the word next to the cross in Captain Pacheco's logbook: Lisboa. It had reached the homeland! He whooped in a way unseemly for a study room in the National Archives.

He turned Torre do Tombo upside down trying to find where Father Ulisses' crucifix had gone once it reached Lisbon. He eventually found his answer not in the National Archives but back in the Episcopal archives, where he had started. The irony was more galling than that. The answer lay in the form of two letters on the very shelf of Cardinal Valdereis's archives where he had found the diary, right next to where it had rested before he filched it. If only a string had attached diary to letters, he would have been spared much work.

The first letter was from the Bishop of Bragança, António Luís Cabral e Câmara, dated April 9, 1804, asking if the good Cardinal Valdereis might have some gift for a parish in the High Mountains of Portugal whose church had lately suffered a fire that destroyed its chancel. It was "a fine old church," he said, though he did not name the church or give its location. In his reply, a copy of which was attached to Bishop Câmara's letter, Cardinal Valdereis stated: "It is my pleasure to send on to you an object of piety that has been with the Lisbon diocese for some time, a singular portrayal of our Lord on the Cross, from the African colonies." Next to a diary that came from the African colonies, could the reference be to any other portrayal of the Lord but Father Ulisses'? Amazing that despite having it right in front of his eyes, Cardinal Valdereis could not see the thing for what it was. But the cleric did not know—and so he could not see.

An exchange of letters with the diocese of Bragança revealed that there was no trace of an African object per se going through their office during Bishop Câmara's years. Tomás was vexed. A creation that was strange and marvellous at its point of origin

had become singular in Lisbon and then, at the hands of provincials, mundane. That, or its nature had been deliberately ignored. Tomás had to take another tack. The crucifix was meant to go to a church that had suffered a fire. Records showed that between 1793, when Câmara was consecrated bishop of Bragança, and 1804, when he wrote to Cardinal Valdereis, there had been fires of varying severity in a number of churches in the High Mountains of Portugal. Such are the dangers of illuminating churches with candles and torches and burning incense during high holidays. Câmara said the crucifix was destined for "a fine old church." What church would earn that favourable description from the bishop? Tomás surmised one that was Gothic or perhaps Romanesque. Which meant a church built in the fifteenth century or earlier. The secretary of the diocese of Bragança did not prove to be a keen ecclesiastical historian. Prodding on Tomás's part yielded the guess that five of the churches blighted by fires might be worthy recipients of Bishop Câmara's praise, namely the widely scattered churches of São Julião de Palácios, Santalha, Mofreita, Guadramil, and Espinhosela.

Tomás wrote to the priest of each church. Their replies were inconclusive. Each priest heaped praise upon his church, extolling its age and beauty. By the sounds of it, there were copies of Saint Peter's Basilica strewn across the High Mountains of Portugal. But none of the priests had much to say that was illuminating on the crucifix at the heart of his church. Each claimed that it was a stirring work of faith, but none knew when his church had acquired it or where it had come from. Finally Tomás decided that there was nothing to do but

go and determine for himself if he was right about the true character of Father Ulisses' crucifix. It was a minor annoyance that it had ended up in the High Mountains of Portugal, that remote and isolated region to the very northeast of his country. Soon enough he would have the object before his eyes.

He is startled by a voice.

"Hello, Senhor Tomás. You are coming to see us, are you not?"

It is the old groundskeeper, Afonso. He has opened the gate and is looking down at Tomás. How did he open it so quietly?

"Yes, I am, Afonso."

"Are you not well?"

"I'm fine."

He works his way to his feet, slipping the book back into his pocket as he does so. The groundskeeper pulls the cord of the bell. As the bell jangles, so do Tomás's nerves. He must go in, it is so. It is not just this home, where Dora and Gaspar died, but every home that now has this effect on him. Love is a house with many rooms, this room to feed the love, this one to entertain it, this one to clean it, this one to dress it, this one to allow it to rest, and each of these rooms can also just as well be the room for laughing or the room for listening or the room for telling one's secrets or the room for sulking or the room for apologizing or the room for intimate togetherness, and, of course, there are the rooms for the new members of the household. Love is a house in which plumbing brings bubbly new emotions every morning, and sewers flush out disputes, and bright windows open up to admit the fresh air of renewed

goodwill. Love is a house with an unshakable foundation and an indestructible roof. He had a house like that once, until it was demolished. Now he no longer has a home anywhere—his flat in the Alfama is as bare as a monk's cell—and to set foot in one is to be reminded of how homeless he is. He knows that is what drew him to Father Ulisses in the first place: their mutual homesickness. Tomás recalls the priest's words on the death of the governor of São Tomé's wife. She was the only European woman on the island. The next such woman lived in Lagos, some eight hundred kilometres across the waters. Father Ulisses had not actually met the governor's wife. He had seen her on only a few occasions.

> The death of a white man causes a greater breach on this pestilent island than it does in Lisbon. When it is a woman, then! Her demise is a weight that is most difficult to bear. I fear the sight of a woman of my own kind will never again comfort me. Never again beauty, gentility, grace. I do not know how much longer I can go on.

Tomás and Afonso cross the cobbled courtyard, the groundskeeper a deferential step ahead of him. Since he is advancing backwards in his usual fashion, they walk in lockstep back to back. At the foot of the steps to the main entrance, Afonso moves aside and bows. As it's a matter of climbing only a few steps, Tomás climbs them backwards. Before he has even reached the door, it opens behind him and he enters the house backwards. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees Damião, his

uncle's long-time butler who has known him since he was a child, waiting for him, his hands open, a smile upon his face. Tomás pivots to face him.

"Hello, Damião."

"Menino Tomás, what a pleasure to see you. You are well?"

"I am, thank you. How is my aunt Gabriela?"

"Splendid. She shines upon us like the sun."

Speaking of the sun, it shines through the high windows upon the bounty of objects in the entrance hall. His uncle has made his vast fortune trading in African goods, principally ivory and timber. Two enormous elephant tusks adorn one wall. Between them hangs a rich, glossy portrait of King Carlos I. His Majesty himself stood before this likeness when he honoured his uncle with his presence in the house. Other walls are decorated with zebra and lion hides, with mounted animal heads above them: lion and zebra, but also eland, hippopotamus, wildebeest, giraffe. Hides also provide the upholstery for the chairs and the couch. African handiworks are displayed in niches and on shelves: necklaces, rustic wooden busts, grisgris, knives and spears, colourful fabrics, drums, and so on. Various paintings—landscapes, portraits of Portuguese landowners and attending natives, but also a large map of Africa, with the Portuguese possessions highlighted—set the scene and evoke some of the characters. And on the right, artfully set amidst tall grass, the stalking stuffed lion.

The hall is a curatorial mess, a cultural mishmash, every artifact ripped out of the context that gave sense to it. But it lit up Dora's eyes. She marvelled at this colonial cornucopia. It

made her proud of the Portuguese empire. She touched every object she could reach, except the lion.

"I'm glad to hear my aunt is well. Is my uncle in his office?" Tomás asks.

"He's waiting for you in the courtyard. If you would be so kind as to follow me."

Tomás does an about-face and follows Damião across the entrance hall and down a carpeted hallway lined with paintings and display cases. They turn in to another hallway. Ahead of Tomás, Damião opens two French windows and moves aside. Tomás steps out onto a semi-circular landing. He hears his uncle's loud, exuberant voice: "Tomás, behold the Iberian rhinoceros!"

Tomás looks over his right shoulder. Tackling the three steps down into the large courtyard, he hurries to him and spins round next to him. They shake hands.

"Uncle Martim, how good to see you. You are well?"

"How could I not be? I have the great pleasure of seeing my one and only nephew."

Tomás is about to inquire about his aunt again but his uncle waves these social niceties aside. "Enough, enough. Well, what do you think of my Iberian rhinoceros?" he asks, pointing. "It is the pride of my menagerie!"

The beast in question stands in the middle of the courtyard, not far from the lean and tall Sabio, its keeper. Tomás gazes at it. Though the light is soft and milky, wrapping it in a flattering gauze, it is in his eyes a farcical monstrosity. "It is . . . magnificent," he replies.

Despite its ungraceful appearance, he has always lamented

the fate of the animal that once roamed the rural corners of his country. Was the Iberian rhinoceros's last bastion not, in fact, the High Mountains of Portugal? Curious, the hold the animal has had on the Portuguese imagination. Human advancement spelled its end. It was, in a sense, run over by modernity. It was hunted and hounded to extinction and vanished, as ridiculous as an old idea—only to be mourned and missed the moment it was gone. Now it is fodder for fado, a stock character in that peculiar form of Portuguese melancholy, *saudade*. Indeed, thinking of the long-gone creature, Tomás is overcome with *saudade*. He is, as the expression goes, *tão docemente triste quanto um rinoceronte,* as sweetly sad as a rhinoceros.

His uncle is pleased with his answer. Tomás observes him with a degree of apprehension. Upon a solid frame of bones his father's brother has padded his body with wealth, a layer of portliness he carries with jocular pride. He lives in Lapa, in the lap of luxury. He spends staggering sums of money on every new bauble. Some years ago his fancy was caught by the bicycle, a two-wheeled transportation device propelled by the rider's own legs. On the hilly, cobbled streets of Lisbon, a bicycle is not merely impractical but dangerous. It can be used safely only on the pathways of parks, a Sunday amusement in which the rider goes round and round in circles, annoying walkers and frightening their children and dogs. His uncle has a whole stable of French Peugeot bicycles. Then he went on to procure *motorized* bicycles that went even faster than pedal bicycles, besides making much noise. And here is a representative of the latest of his expensive curios, recently acquired. "But Uncle," he adds carefully, "I see only an *automobile*."